

Paragon Mill, 1859
Augusta
Richmond County
Georgia

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

PARAGON MILL

HAER GA-8

Location: Augusta, Georgia
UTM:
Quad:

Date of Construction: 1859

Present Owner:

Present Use: Vacant. Being rented for storage.

Significance: One of the few ante bellum industrial buildings standing in Augusta, Georgia, and the second oldest along the Augusta Canal. Its operation as a cotton seed oil factory during the 1870's through the 1920's adds a new dimension to the variety of industries using water power during the supposed age of steam.

Historian: Robert L. Spude, 1977

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PARAGON MILL

We know little about the Paragon Mill. It began as a flour mill in 1859, was refurbished as a cotton seed oil company in the 1870's, and in 1929 was refitted as a bagging plant. In 1966 the mill closed down and since then has had all its machinery removed.

The bright red three-story ante bellum mill has pressed metal and wood additions nearly surrounding it. Though the second and third levels of the Augusta Canal once served as boundaries to the mill property, and a headrace led to the mill turbines, all traces of a water power system have disappeared. A bricked up archway on the Paragon Mill's south side is the only telltale hint of the old hydro-mechanical system; the second level and headrace have been covered over, and the third level is a mere trickle.

Alfred Baker, a successful Augusta merchant, built the Paragon Flour Mill in 1859, probably as an adjunct to his wholesale grocery business. [1] Baker operated the mill barely two years when he advertised for its sale in the summer of 1861. [2] Because of the Civil War he may not have been able to sell, and the mill seems not to have operated from the Civil War through the 1870's. [3]

The city directory for 1879 lists the mill, but as the Augusta Cotton Seed Oil. Just prior to the Civil War, uses for cotton seed oil had been developed, and by the 1870's cotton seed oil mills spread throughout the South. Memphis, Tennessee, the world's largest inland cotton market, became the center of cotton seed oil production, while Augusta, as the second largest inland cotton market, probably was not

far behind.

Robert Thompson, of Nashville, Tennessee, organized the Augusta Cotton Seed Oil Company, which bought the Paragon Mill and converted it into a cotton seed oil mill in the mid-1870's. The authors of the Handbook of Augusta (1878) wrote a description of the operation: "The Augusta Oil Company's works are located in the old Paragon Mills, which were almost entirely rebuilt and put in fine condition. The brick mill is three stories in height. A large wooden warehouse attached is used for the storage of cotton seed. The seed are carried up through elevators to the third story of the mill, where they are divested of all the cotton which adheres to them after they have gone through the ordinary gin at the plantation. Quite an amount of lint cotton is thus secured. While this lint is not of very long staple, it is still a very fair article. After leaving the gin the seed go down to the hullers, where the husk is broken away from the kernel. The mass then goes up stairs again to the separator, where the husks and kernels are separated. The kernels now take a second journey to the second floor and are passed between heavy rollers, which mash them into a sort of pulp. The latter is put into large iron heaters and thoroughly cooked. After undergoing this process it is emptied into bags, which are put between hair mats. These, with their contents, are then placed in a hydraulic press and an immense pressure applied. The oil runs into a long trough and thence into a tank, from which it is dipped out and put into barrels. This crude oil is either sold to refiners or shipped to the mill, at Nashville, to be refined. The pulp which remains in the sacks is

compressed into hard cakes. A portion of these are ground into fine meal, to be used either as stock feed or a fertilizer. The cakes are exported largely to England, where they are in great demand as stock feed. A ton of cotton seed produces about thirty-two gallons of oil and 1,000 pounds of meal, besides the husks and lint." [4] Wooden warehouses built around the mill housed the cotton seeds, meal, and fertilizer, while all the processing (separating and pressing) centered in the Paragon mill. The machinery ran by water power. The company employed 25 hands.

Sanborn Fire Insurance maps published in 1884, 1890, 1904, and 1923 show that the mill changed little. The 1904 map notes a brick engine room being added to the building's north side. Another brick addition went up between 1904 and 1923, housing the "hullers" for the expanding operation. Both buildings still stand. [5]

During the same years the mill became an industrial pawn for larger cotton seed oil companies. Around 1900 the Georgia Cotton Seed Oil Company bought the mill. They in turn sold out to the American Cotton Seed Oil Company. [6]

In 1927 another transfer was made. Hill Silver, a 26-year-old optimist, bought the mill, cleared out the machinery, and installed cards, spindles, and looms in order to produce bagging, the material which covers cotton bales. The machinery was powered by overhead shafts, but instead of turbines and water power, the mill operated by electricity. The new company operated under the corporate title of the Standard Bagging Company. [7]

For 20 years the company sold its products on the national market and, according to Hill Silver, the profits were okay. Following World War II, the independence of Pakistan, and its businessmen's entry into the bagging market, his sales dropped. The company could not compete with the less expensive Pakistan bagging. In response to the challenge, the old Paragon mill was refitted with looms that wove felt. Through the 1960's, the company sold felt to the auto industry. [8]

In 1966, Hill Silver sold out and retired. The new owners operated the mill briefly as a waste factory but have since removed the machinery. [9] A large sign on 12th Street now (1977) offers the building for lease.

The 118-year history of the Paragon mill is devoid of associations with great events, engineering feats, or important inventions. Instead, it exemplifies the multiple use of the utilitarian mill building. And, as a one-time user of water power from the Augusta Canal, the Paragon mill operation is another instance of the canal's success in making Augusta the "Lowell of the South."

Footnotes

1. Charles C. Jones and Salem Dutcher, Memorial History of Augusta (Syracuse, New York: D. Mason & Co., 1890), Part II, p. 3. The construction date 1859 has been deduced from the mill's listing in an 1861 Augusta business directory, Jones' comment on p. 3 that the mill was built before Baker retired from the mercantile business in 1860, and the absence of a water rent agreement between the city and the Paragon Mill when those record books end in 1858. Augusta Canal Record Book II, Vault, Municipal Building, Augusta, Georgia.
2. Daily Chronicle & Sentinel (Augusta), August 1, 1861, 2:5; August 8, 1861, 3:1.
3. Augusta city directories for 1865-1866, 1867, and 1872 make no mention of the mill. Directories in collections of Richmond County Historical Society, Reese Library, Augusta College, Augusta, Georgia.
4. John L. Maxwell, Pleasant A. Stovall, and T. R. Gibson, Handbook of Augusta (Augusta, 1878), p. 23.
5. Sanborn-Perris fire insurance maps, 1884, 1890, 1904, 1923, in map room, University of Georgia Science Library, Athens.
6. Ibid.
7. Interview with Hill Silver, July 5, 1977, Augusta, Georgia.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.

Bibliography

Interviews

Oral interview conducted July 5, 1977, by Robert L. Spude with Mr. Hill Silver, Augusta, Georgia.

Mr. Silver owned and operated the mill for 39 years, 1927-1966.

Printed Sources

Jones, Charles C., and Dutcher, Salem. Memorial History of Augusta. Syracuse, New York: D. Mason & Co., 1890.

Maxwell, John L., Stovall, Pleasant A., and Gibson, T.R. Handbook of Augusta. Augusta, 1978.

Contains description of the cotton seed oil operation at the mill.

Sanborn-Perris fire insurance maps for the city of Augusta, 1884, 1890, 1904, 1923, in map room, University of Georgia Science Library, Athens.